FAQs/Questions and Answers

Pacific Northwest Region – *Regional Office*

Forest Resiliency Project

Blue Mountains Restoration Strategy

Ochoco, Umatilla and Wallowa-Whitman National Forests

Background/Restoration Need

Why has this project been undertaken?

- Large areas of National Forest system land are at risk from the effects of a changing climate, including large and severe wildfire, insect and disease, and other stressors. Nationally, the potential restoration treatment needs range between 65 million to 82 million acres.
- The current pace of active management (thinning/prescribed burning) is not keeping pace with forest growth. In order to create resilient forests, planning must be accomplished at a faster pace, and we must work together to get projects implemented.

Why is this project necessary now?

- To restore ecological resiliency to national forests, while ensuring socio-economic viability of communities, the Forest Service is accelerating the pace and scale of restoration. Spurred by USDA Secretary Vilsack, the Forest Service put in place a number of initiatives to increase the pace of forest restoration on national forests in 2012.

Was the Region/Forests directed to undertake this effort?

- In 2013, the Forest Service Chief asked all National Forests to increase the pace of ecosystem restoration efforts by 20% over the next 3 years.
- The Regional Forester for the Pacific Northwest Region (PNW) and The Nature Conservancy initiated a joint restoration needs assessment in 2013, which revealed that more than 2.3 million acres in the Blue Mountains are in urgent need of active management toward more natural ranges of variability and greater resiliency.
- The PNW Regional Forester initiated the Eastside Restoration Strategy to address the active restoration need in the Eastside Forests. Part of this strategy was the development of the dedicated Blue Mountains Restoration Strategy Interdisciplinary Team (IDT).

Why is the project so big?

- The Blue Mountains Restoration Strategy IDT has been charged by the Regional Forester to work at a large landscape scale, explore and develop new methods for planning and analysis, and to work closely with local tribes, governments, agencies and interested public groups, all aimed at increasing the pace and scale of forest restoration in the Blue Mountains.
- The threats to the Blue Mountains National Forests span administrative and ownership boundaries, requiring collaboration among multiple tribes, agencies and private landowners.

for the greatest good

- The 2015 fire season set the record as the worst in U.S. history, with more than 282,000 acres reported as burned in the Blue Mountains. Because current forest project planning takes several years to complete, forest managers are unable to keep up with the pace of forest growth to restore these conditions.
- To create future forests that are more resilient to changing fire regimes and climate, we must take greater action now to restore our landscapes, increase fire's beneficial effects, and reduce the exposure of homes and sensitive habitats to the unwanted effects of fire.

Does this solution pertain only to the National Forests?

- Public agencies, tribes and local collaborative groups are working together in innovative ways to get work done on national forest lands at a faster pace and scale.

Forest Resiliency Project Overview

What is the purpose of the Forest Resiliency Project?

- The purpose of the Forest Resiliency Project is to return the Blue Mountains to healthier conditions, reduce the risks of unusually large and severe wildfires, reintroduce the natural role of fire to the landscape, and contribute to social and economic vitality.

What are the proposed treatments?

  - This project proposes active management (using thinning and fire) on 610,000 high priority acres of dry forests in need of restoration across the Ochoco, Umatilla, and Wallowa-Whitman National Forests.
  - This project will develop fuel treatments on about 180,000 acres to modify fire behavior potential at strategic locations to support safe and effective, large scale wildfire and prescribed fire management.
  - Areas excluded from consideration in this project include: existing Forest Service vegetation project planning areas, recently burned or implemented project areas, Wilderness, Research Natural Areas, Inventoried Roadless Areas, or in an area otherwise identified by the respective Forest Supervisor as being low restoration priority.
  - Proposed treatments by forest include:
    - 120,000 acres of treatment on the Ochoco National Forest
    - 210,000 acres of treatment on the Umatilla National Forest
    - 280,000 acres of treatment on the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest

How is the planning for this project different than other projects?

- Planning at this scale requires innovative approaches in project design and analysis, testing ways to reach NEPA decisions differently, and working closely with tribes and communities. This project is intentionally designed differently than traditional project plans to accelerate large landscape planning. The project also is designed to allow for flexibility at the local level during implementation to ensure implementation incorporates the most up-to-date local information.
  - The Forest Resiliency project is broad geographically, but narrow in scope. The broadscale analysis area is the entire Blue Mountains ecoregion. However, this project only addresses priority dry forest vegetation or strategic fuel treatment needs across National Forest System Lands.

  - This project will develop an implementable FEIS to which Forest or Ranger District decisions can be tiered, applying new approaches to accelerate forest restoration.
  - Decisions will be signed by the respective Forest Supervisor, and can differ by Forest in terms of their nature, extent and timing.

- The project integrates three focus areas (forest restoration, safe wildland fire restoration and management, and climate change) to develop a cohesive strategy to address of the magnitude of the restoration need across Blue Mountains National Forests.
- The three focus areas each play a critical role in forest resiliency. An integrated approach will help determine where forested lands have the greatest restoration need, based on a scientific understanding of past and potential future conditions. These focus areas guide the team in identifying priority treatment areas across the landscape.
- The current Forest Resiliency Project analysis area includes three National Forests and coordination with three collaborative groups and three tribes.

Is this the only restoration effort in the Blue Mountains?

- The Blue Mountains Restoration Strategy is not the only effort in the Blue Mountains to actively address restoration need. The Malheur National Forest is piloting a complementary effort to accelerate the pace and scale of restoration. The Malheur has a significant investment in accelerated restoration, success working locally with two collaborative groups and an ongoing ten year stewardship project. The Blue Mountains Restoration Strategy Team will support these ongoing efforts by providing scientific analyses and tools to the staff and leadership of the Malheur National Forest. Together, these two efforts will make a difference on the landscape and provide important lessons learned to the region and nation.

How are roads addressed in this project?

- The project will utilize the existing road system currently in place to implement vegetation and strategic fuels activities. No new road construction is proposed, unless it is to meet standard and guidelines or Endangered Species Act consultation guidance for road location (for example, to relocate a road currently in a riparian habitat conservation area).
- No road closures are included in the proposed action. However, there are standards and guidelines in some Forest Plans that tell us what road densities to move toward. Consultation with regulatory agencies throughout the planning process will determine if road actions are needed for resource concerns.

Who else has been involved in developing this project?

- The project utilizes effective collaboration between representatives from environmental organizations, timber industry, tribes, county governments, the general public, and various government agencies to develop restoration and management strategies in the project area.

Forest Resiliency Project Objectives

- Conserve or restore forest resilience to disturbance across the Blue Mountains
- Conserve high social values (i.e. public and firefighter safety, tribal treaty rights, high resource values)
- Proactively provide options to manage fire behavior and effects to increase safety for the public and firefighters, and support the increased use of planned and unplanned wildland fire, where needed
- Contribute to social and economic vitality and resiliency

- Test innovative NEPA planning that reduces planning time for implementable projects, while meeting policy, regulatory and legal requirements for environmental analysis, public involvement, and sound decision-making.

Benefits of Landscape Restoration

- Restoration of diverse landscapes is critical to maintaining and enhancing the functions needed from productive, resilient forests to support thriving communities and economies.
- Restoration helps to ensure that forests continue to provide the goods and services that communities want and need, including clean air and water, wood products, energy, recreation opportunities, carbon management, and fish and wildlife habitat.
- The Forest Service is increasing our impact on landscapes and communities by:
    - Integrating efforts and increasing the pace of restoration
    - Focusing investments in collaboration with partners and the public
    - Leveraging resources across landscapes
    - Broadening restoration to landscape-scales and working across land ownerships
    - Providing benefits beyond national forest and grassland boundaries
    - Creating efficiencies and sustainable partnerships and practices
    - Preparing for ecological, social, and economic change
    - Using the best available science in project planning to inform decisions
- Restoration work on National Forest lands supports multi-partner planning, implementation, and funding of landscape scale restoration with adjacent landowners.

Benefits of the Forest Resiliency Project

- All lands integrated assessment of restoration need
- Greater forest and community resiliency to fire under a changing climate
- Increase in open canopied habitats that are currently under represented on the landscape
- Restoration of forest structure and related aquatic, plant and wildlife habitats
- Jobs and supplemental economic benefits to communities and an increase in consistency of forest products from National Forest lands, therefore benefiting the communities of the Blue Mountains.
- Data and tools to support multi-partner planning, implementation, and funding of landscape scale restoration
- Improved wildfire management decision-making
- Increased abundance of old and large tree forests, open forest conditions, and habitat for threatened, endangered, and sensitive plant and animal species.